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OUT OF THE FOLD:

A WORD

TO

SOME WHO STAND ALOOF

FROM THE

VISIBLE CHURCH.

"I speak as to wise men; judge ye what I say."—PAUL.

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BY THE AUTHOR OF THIS TRACT.

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OUT OF THE FOLD.

IN almost every congregation there is a class of men whose attitude towards the Church and religion causes deep anxiety to every true Christian. I do not mean the openly vicious and profane, but a class whose integrity is unimpeachable, and in whose moral deportment there is little to blame; a class who engage in works of benevolence; who give money for the spread of religion and the relief of the poor; who are interested, more or less, in religious work, yet, strange to say, are not themselves religious. They understand and approve of religion in the abstract, but its saving power they have never felt.

When we look at such men we think of the Saviour's words to the Scribe,—“Thou art not far from the kingdom of God;” and the wish springs up in the heart,—“Oh that these men who gather *around* the pale of the Christian Church were decidedly *within* it, and that not merely by a formal profession, but in the experience of a true conversion to Christ!” Reader! if you are one of the class referred to, I pray you to ponder what follows:—

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I. IN ORDER TO SALVATION, YOUR PRESENT ATTITUDE TOWARDS GOD AND RELIGION MUST BE CHANGED IN SOME WAY.

1. *Your present position is unsatisfactory.* It must be unsatisfactory to yourself. You feel that you are not in a right relation either to God or His Church. You feel that you *ought* to be a decided Christian, and that the full weight of your talents and influence should be thrown into the scale on the side of religion. Doubtless you could assign many reasons why you have not taken this decisive step; but are these reasons satisfactory? I trow not. They do not satisfy your own conscience, much less will they satisfy God in the great day.

1. *Your present position is unsafe,—yea dangerous.* I assume that you are not one of the openly ungodly; but your attitude tells that you have not yet closed with God's offer of salvation. You are not trying to make your calling and election sure, but you are leaving everything that pertains to the eternal future in a condition of awful *uncertainty*, and are thus running the risk of being counted an enemy of Christ. "He that is not with me," said Jesus, "is against me, and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad."

3. *Your present position is opposed to the mind and will of Christ.*—To give of your substance for the propagation of the Gospel, is well; but you cannot serve God by proxy. "Go, work to-day in my vineyard," is a command addressed to you. Christ demands open profession and willing service. "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross

daily, and follow me." "Whosoever, therefore, shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him also shall the Son of Man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

4. *Your present position is unjustifiable.* It may not be one of open hostility to Christ, but neither is it one of real friendship. You are trying—it may be all unconsciously—to occupy neutral ground. This you cannot do without guilt. In time of peace it is not necessary that a man should continually proclaim his devotion to his country; but in time of war, when his country is invaded, neutrality is *disloyalty*. Such is, substantially, your position. The Christian army is in the field, but you refuse to aid. You keep aloof from God's people, and turn your back upon the Lord's table as though you were a Turk or a Heathen. Can you justify this? "Curse ye Meroz!" Why?—what had they done? Had they taken up arms against Jehovah? No! Had they gone over to the enemy, and fought against the chosen people? No! What, then, had they done? *Nothing!* Their neutrality was their crime. "Because they came not up to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty."

If you are now convinced that some change is necessary, let us proceed a step farther:—

II. NO CHANGE WILL AVAIL THAT DOES NOT LEAD IN THE DIRECTION OF THE CHURCH OF GOD, AND OF VITAL RELIGION.

Do not misunderstand me: I do not use the term "Church of God" in a narrow or sectarian sense. I

mean simply that it is the bounden duty of every man to give his heart to Christ, and to unite with some branch of His visible Church. In other words, the duty of union and fellowship with those who love the Lord Jesus Christ is imperative. Let me illustrate the necessity of a change in the direction I have indicated :—

1. *A change towards Infidelity will not do.* That would be, in your case, a change from comparative indifference to open enmity, and would make your position worse instead of better. You cannot rid yourself of guilt by denying its existence, and whether you believe it or not, the great fact of *accountability to God* still remains. The only hope the Infidel can have of escaping endless misery is the hope that the Bible may not be true. Now if the Bible be not true, still the Infidel is no better off than the Christian ; but if the Bible be true,—what then ?

2. *A change towards Universalism will not do.* That would be closing your eyes against danger instead of trying to shun it. Many a man has sought to escape from the stings of a guilty conscience by trying to believe that God is too merciful to punish any man forever ; but it may be well to remember that a man's belief or disbelief cannot alter one of God's facts, and, let Universalists say as they will, *this* truth stands firm—"The wicked shall be turned into hell, with all the nations that forget God."

3. *A Solitary Religion, apart from all Church connection, will not do.* I do not say that a man cannot be a Christian apart from membership in the visible Church, but it is, to say the least, exceedingly impro-

nable that he ever *will*. At best he will be a very *defective* Christian. His religion will be eminently selfish, and selfishness is opposed to the religion of Jesus. Some of the graces of the Spirit he may have, but like plants in the dark they will droop and fade for want of light and air. Believe me, your intention of being a secret disciple, though well meant, is but a snare of the devil to delude your soul.

What, then, is the conclusion of the whole matter? It is [that, in the matter of *duty*, nothing short of a sincere, open profession of religion, and union with the Church of Christ, will satisfy either God or your own conscience. But such a profession involves much. Let it be understood, therefore, that

III. THIS CHANGE MUST BE ONE OF BOTH HEART AND LIFE.

And this involves, on *your* part,

1. *A change of purpose.* Your purposes in regard to religion have been indefinite or vacillating; henceforth let them be definite and decided. You are now drifting along with a vague idea that at some time—you hardly know when, and in some way—you hardly know how, you will become a Christian. You have purposed to give your heart to God at a "more convenient season," but the purpose has never ripened into execution. Be not deceived. Salvation and heaven are not won by halting between two opinions. "The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force."

2. *A change of conduct.* And this is two-fold:—
(1) Breaking off all sinful practices, according to God's commandment—"Cease to do evil;" and again—"Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him turn unto the Lord and He will have mercy upon him." There be those who decry all this as if it were seeking salvation by works, and they ask—"Suppose a man forsake his sins, will *that* save him?" I answer "No; but *not* forsaking his sins will damn him." Christ came to save his people *from* their sins, not *in* them; and, be assured, he will not save that man who will not forsake his sins. (2) Engaging earnestly in all known duties,—such as reading the Scriptures, praying to God, keeping holy the Sabbath, going to the House of God, relieving the poor, etc. Here the question arises,—Is it right for an unconverted man to do these things? I ask in return,—Is it right for him *not* to do them? These are duties which God requires of *all* men. In the day of Judgment sinners will be condemned for not doing them. (See Matt. 25: 41-6). But suppose a man does all these things, is he, therefore, saved? If by "saved" you mean pardoned and justified, I say No; these things are not the end, but they are means to an end, and that end is—salvation. He who finds Jesus finds salvation; but he who would *find* must first *seek*. And *where* is he to seek if not in the Scriptures and the means of grace, and *how* is he to seek if not by forsaking his sins and crying to God? Be assured that while Christian duties do not in themselves save a man, the *neglect* of them

involves him in condemnation. "These ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone."

3. *A change of relation.* Your relations have hitherto been with the world; let them now be with the people of God. There is much practical wisdom in the old adage—"A man is known by the company he keeps." If your friendships are all with the world and with worldly people, the broadest charity can hardly hope that you are a Christian. And may not these worldly associations and friendships have been one great obstacle in the way of your becoming a decided Christian? Do you say Christians are no better than others? Perhaps if you knew Christians better you would respect and love them more; and the "inconsistencies" of which you complain would vanish when, in your heart, "brotherly love" had taken the place of cold suspicion. If the Church is not all it should be, come and help to make it better; and let your union with the Church of Christ be the evidence of your changed purposes in regard to religion.

4. *A change of heart.* Hitherto I have been looking at the subject from one point of view—that of human responsibility and duty. Do not think, however, that I have either forgotten or ignored the important truth—"By grace are ye saved; through faith and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." I well understand that God alone can change the heart and make it new; but believing that salvation is a blessing to be *sought*, I have tried to indicate a course that I think will be helpful to seekers, especially the class that all along I have had in view. Ponder well, I beseech you, the Saviour's

words—"Except a man be born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God;" and then consider whether you are more likely to secure that priceless boon by continuing in your present attitude, than by taking the course I have indicated.

Permit me now to point out, very briefly,

IV. SOME OF THE ADVANTAGES WHICH A CHANGE IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION WILL SECURE.

1. *You will secure peace of soul.* I mean that peace which comes when a man feels that he is no longer at war with his Maker; when he feels that the strife is over, and that he has fallen in with the plans and purposes of God. In a word, I mean that peace which results from a consciousness of doing *right*. There is a still deeper peace—a "peace which passeth understanding"—which is God's gift to him that believes in Jesus; and this peace, too, shall be yours if you "follow on to know the Lord."

2. *You will secure thorough identification with God's cause*—no small advantage in a state of thing where *neutrality is sin*. Once fully identified with the cause of God you will no longer be halting "between two opinions." You will no longer run the risk of being suspected for a secret enemy, or, at least, a half-hearted friend. Your influence and example will all be on the side of *right*, and by just so much will the cause of sin and wrong be weakened.

3. *You will secure Christian fellowship and sympathy.* I confess I have no faith in a *solitary* Christianity. Such an one may have fewer temptations to evil, but,

again, he has fewer incentives to good. The words of the Preacher apply forcibly here:—"Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. . . . And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a three-fold cord is not quickly broken."

4. *You secure free access to the means of grace*—and to him who uses them aright, they are very helpful and very precious. In the estimation of some they may be of small account; but he who despises the means of grace, despises Him who ordained them. He who loves not to assemble with God's people for prayer and praise, may find himself at last excluded from the goodly fellowship of the redeemed in glory; and he who carelessly turns his back upon the Lord's Table *here*, may find no place at the "marriage supper of the Lamb" *above*.

"And what shall I more say?" I will say in all sincerity and affection—"Come thou with us and we will do thee good!" Stay no longer in the "far country," but hasten with earnest heart to Him who waits to give you a Father's welcome. Tarry no longer among the aliens, but claim, through Christ, power to become a son of God. Halt no longer between two opinions, but now "come out from" the world and "be separate." I trust you are already convinced you *ought* to be a Christian: may that conviction soon deepen into the resolve,—“By God's grace I *will* be a Christian.”

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